



CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

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OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH HAZARD ASSESSMENT

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OEHHA Releases Draft Advisory on Mercury in Fish in Lower Feather River

SACRAMENTO -- The California Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) is seeking public comments on a draft fish advisory concerning elevated levels of mercury in some fish in the lower Feather River in Butte, Yuba and Sutter counties.

"One of the unfortunate legacies of California's colorful gold-mining era is elevated mercury levels in many of the region's fish," OEHHA Director Dr. Joan Denton said. "People can still enjoy eating the fish they catch from the Feather River if they choose species that are low in mercury and eat them in moderation."

A fact sheet and draft report containing the proposed advisory and OEHHA's evaluation of potential health threats posed by consumption of fish containing methylmercury (the most prevalent and toxic form of mercury in fish) are available for viewing and downloading on OEHHA's Web site at www.oehha.ca.gov.

OEHHA staff scientists will make a presentation, answer questions and accept public comments on the draft advisory at a public workshop to be held from 3 pm to 5 pm on Wednesday, August 30, at the Feather River Tribal Health Center, 2145 5th Avenue, Oroville.

Written comments on the draft advisory must be received by 5 p.m. on September 11, 2006, at OEHHA's Pesticide and Environmental Toxicology Branch, 1001 I Street, Sacramento, CA 95812. OEHHA will review all comments, make any appropriate revisions and issue a final advisory.

The draft advisory covers the 75-mile length of the lower Feather River from the Fish Barrier Dam (located just below the Oroville Dam) to the confluence of the Sacramento River.

The draft advisory contains proposed "safe eating guidelines" for consumption of fish from the lower Feather River. One set of guidelines is for women of childbearing age and children age 17 and younger, who are particularly sensitive to methylmercury. A second set of guidelines is for women beyond their childbearing years and men. The guidelines identify fish species that may be eaten up to two times a week. Until final advisories are issued, OEHHA recommends that the public follow the guidance in the draft advisories.

The draft safe-eating guidelines recommend that women of childbearing age and children 17 years and younger may eat up to two meals a week of sunfish or one meal a

week of carp or Sacramento sucker from the lower Feather River. They should eat no more than one meal a month of largemouth, smallmouth or spotted bass or catfish (and only if no other fish are eaten), and should avoid all consumption of striped bass and Sacramento pikeminnow from the river.

Women beyond childbearing years and men may eat up to three meals a week of sunfish, two meals a week of Sacramento sucker, carp or channel catfish, or one meal a week of largemouth, smallmouth or spotted bass or white catfish. They should eat no more than one meal a month of striped bass or Sacramento pikeminnow (and only if no other fish are eaten).

The draft advisory incorporates the results of fish sampling conducted by the State Water Resources Control Board, the CalFED Mercury Project, and the Sacramento River Watershed Program.

Mercury in fish from these water bodies originated from gold-mining and dredging activity that began during the Gold Rush. Miners used inorganic mercury to extract gold from mined materials and discharged the waste into rivers and streams, where mercury accumulated in the sediment. Bacteria converted the inorganic mercury to the more toxic methylmercury, which fish take in from their diet. Methylmercury can accumulate in fish to concentrations many thousands of times greater than mercury levels in the surrounding water. Physical contact with the water is safe.

Women can pass methylmercury on to their fetuses through the placenta, and to infants through breast milk. Excessive exposure to methylmercury may affect the nervous system in children, leading to subtle decreases in learning ability, language skills, attention and/or memory. These effects may occur through adolescence as the nervous system continues to develop. In adults, the most subtle symptoms associated with methylmercury toxicity are numbness or tingling sensations in the hands and feet or around the mouth.

Because fish are an important part of a balanced diet, the American Heart Association recommends the consumption of two meals a week of fish that are low in mercury, such as shrimp, king crab, scallops, farmed catfish, wild ocean salmon, oysters, tilapia, flounder and sole. To maximize the health benefits of fish consumption, OEHHA recommends that people eating fish from the lower Feather River or other California water bodies choose fish with lower levels of mercury that can be eaten most frequently. People consuming the maximum amount of Feather River fish recommended in the draft advisory should refrain from eating other fish during the period of time identified in the advisory.

The Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment is one of six entities within the California Environmental Protection Agency. OEHHA's mission is to protect and enhance public health and the environment by objective scientific evaluation of risks posed by hazardous substances.